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COMMENTARY: Information tech for health care

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At a recent doctor appointment, a friend of mine who is about to turn 80 handed the clipboard right back to the receptionist, when asked to "update their records." She exclaimed in annoyance that they should already have all that information, as she had been seeing that doctor for more than four years.

This was her rebellion at being asked to once again retrieve from her failing memory details about insurance, prescriptions, scans, tests, surgeries and more. If amazon.com can remember what books you ordered over

the last three years, why can't your doctor's computer remind him what drugs you're taking and determine if there is a potentially dangerous combination?

The technology exists, but our health-care industry has been slow to change. Only about 14 percent of doctors and primarily large hospitals use electronic medical records and most of those don't have systems that can communicate with other caregivers of their mutual patients. The result is incomplete patient records and more than 100,000 deaths annually, due to medical errors caused by missing patient data, illegible prescriptions and other notes, and faulty memories.

Medical technology is advancing rapidly; medical communication is still a morass of paper files, Post-It notes, faxes and phone messages.

Businesses worldwide began employing information technology more than a decade ago to give them an edge with customers, suppliers, employees and investors. Not only did information technology improve customer service and product quality, it gave businesses a competitive edge by allowing them to cut overhead costs and streamline operations. But most doctors' offices and many hospitals continue to rely on their old but comfortable habit of keeping paper records. It's time for comfort to give way to progress.

Health IT will modernize health-care delivery. Through health IT, doctors' offices and patients can work together to compile comprehensive electronic health records that include allergies, vaccination records, prescriptions, treatments, test results, vital statistics and more. Once an electronic health record is established for a patient, permission can be given to a doctor or nurse to view it and update it. The patient isn't plagued by having to "reinvent the wheel" with every new doctor visit or hospital stay.

There are even greater benefits possible with health IT. With greater efficiency, we can lower the cost of care and improve access. Electronic recordkeeping reduces waiting times and eliminates repeat visits in community clinics because test results and other information

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are available when the patient arrives. Clinicians can spend more time with patients, improving communication and care quality. Coordinating care among providers is much more easily accomplished, and duplicate tests or treatments can be avoided.

In addition to advances in patient care and electronic medical record keeping, health IT will save the nation at least \$81 billion in health-care costs, according to the Rand Corp. Widespread adoption of electronic medical records could reduce spending on health care as much as 30 percent, the Department of Health and Human Services says. These represent significant savings for a nation that spends 16 percent of its gross domestic product on health care.

More importantly, with robust health information systems this country will more effectively institute much-needed reforms to address access, cost and quality in health-care delivery. For example, when we bring more children into coverage, wouldn't it be better if we knew how many have asthma and how many are receiving appropriate treatment? Is their health improving in the new program or should we do something differently?

Information systems are essential to knowing not only about your own care, but about the effectiveness of our health-care programs overall. To what degree are professionally developed care guidelines being followed? How much does cost vary around the country? Which procedures or drugs are more effective than others? For what types of patients? Answering all these questions requires data that are gathered and analyzed over time.

The U.S. government must take the lead in promoting health IT and its adoption by health-care teams nationwide. In addition to supportive legislation, the government can help by establishing standards for the technology so systems can communicate with each other, providing incentives for health IT use, and using advanced technologies in its own health programs.

U.S. health care is sick. If it's to get better, it needs health IT. It is just what the doctor ordered.

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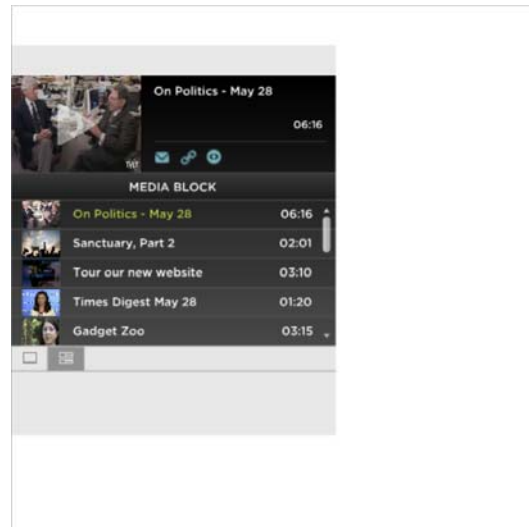
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